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ABSTRACT

During the course of a large-scale study of teacher preparation for standardized tests in two low-stakes school districts, the question of whether the attitudes of teachers about standardized tests are a factor in their administration of mandated standardized tests in the classroom was addressed. Third-, fourth-, and sixth-grade teachers (n=178) completed a survey of perceptions of standardized tests that also asked how much time teachers spent preparing their classes for the tests. Students in one school district took the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills in grades 3 and 6 (1,734 students and 1,607 students, respectively), while 1,955 fourth graders in the other district took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Teachers' perceptions of standardized tests varied, but were not consistently related either to the effort that teachers put into preparing for the tests or to their students' test performance. Results do not contradict the assumption that teachers administered the tests in ways largely uninfluenced by their personal feelings as reflected in the Likert items of the survey. Eight tables and three graphs present study findings. There is a 10-item list of references. (SLD)

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Does it Really Matter What Teachers Think of Tests?

Mandated Testing in Two "Low Stakes" School Districts

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Does it Really Matter What Teachers Think of Tests?
Mandated Testing in Two "Low Stakes" School Districts

Teachers' perceptions of standardized tests--and their administration of those tests--have received much recent attention, certainly in part because of the widespread use of test scores as accountability measures of teacher, school, or even district performance. The term "high stakes" (Popham, 1987) has been applied to situations where standardized tests are used as the primary accountability measure, with what appear to be profound consequences for both pupils and teachers. Empirical data from several recent studies--a number of them in "high stakes" environments--paint a disturbing picture of the events associated with standardized test administration. These include reports of teachers' perceptions and uses of "cheating" practices in preparing their classes for standardized tests (Monsaas & Engelhard, 1991), of pressure to improve test scores (e.g., Haladyna, Nolen, Hass, 1991; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991), and of deviations from standardization procedures (Allard & Fish, 1990; 1991), as well as probable evidence of spuriously high performance levels on standardized tests (e.g., Koretz, Linn, Dunbar, & Shepard, 1991).

These studies might be read as suggesting the following scenario: Teachers, feeling pressures to produce ever-higher standardized test scores, denigrate the value of the test, compromise standardization procedures through various means (e.g., teaching the test, allowing students more time than standardization procedures permit), and thus promote spuriously high levels of performance by their students. The linkage thus implied between external pressures for achievement, teachers' perceptions of standardized testing in elementary school classrooms, testing practices, and subsequent student performance on tests is commonly developed in the literature as a direct and linear one.

But is it that simple? The linkages between psychological states and behavior do not always fit a neat linear model, particularly when people are operating in real-life situations. Apparently it is the case that teachers' attitudes toward standardized tests have become more negative in the past 10

or 15 years, possibly because of their increased use as accountability "tools" (e.g., Yap, 1985). But it is not appropriate to argue that a link necessarily exits between standardized tests, accountability, negative teacher attitudes, questionable test-administration practices, and bogus levels of achievement. Pressures to produce ever-higher standardized test scores can generally be expected to have differential, rather than uniform, effects on teachers (cf., Allard & Fish, 1991). Moreover, even though it is an easy matter to find teachers who express strong negative feelings about standardized tests, it is much more difficult to document evidence of deviations from standardization procedures or test score pollution. Thus while studies such as Allard and Fish's (1991) and Monsaas and Engelhard's (1991) provide rich sources of quotations from teachers directed toward standardized tests, they do not provide much detailed information on just how teachers' perceptions may be linked with test administration or student performance. A rare observational study of elementary teachers administering standardized tests in their classes does indicate that deviations from accepted standardization procedures are widespread, but also noted the probability that most such deviations may not have a great impact on measures of achievement (Frisbie & Andrews, 1990).

In short, it is probably a mistake to assume that every teacher with a bad attitude cheats on standardized test administration. To return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper, in many cases it may <u>not</u> matter what teachers think of a standardized test, at least in terms of how they administer that test.

It is also well to remind ourselves that not all school districts are likely to be "high stakes," even if it seems--and it does--that pressures for improved standardized test scores are omnipresent. Of course, many recent studies (e.g., Koretz et al. [1991]; Shepard and Dougherty [1991]) deal with high-stakes environments. But the events surrounding standardized test administration in schools where less pressure is associated with it could well differ from the ominous scenarios noted above. For example, it could be the case that teachers' attitudes toward a standardized test in "low stakes"

schools, while negative, are in fact immaterial to the ways they administer tests or to the results. Such teachers might well choose to administer a standardized test according to appropriate standardization procedures out of a sense of duty or professional obligation (or perhaps because of a bureaucratic orientation [Allard & Fish, 1991]). In any case, one should not assume that teachers' perceptions of testing and the ways they choose to administer a test are of necessity closely related, just as the link between attitude and action has not always been predictable in studies of behavior in real-life settings.

Given probable differences across school districts in the pressures associated with standardized testing and the impact of those pressures on teachers and students, it seems appropriate to examine the linkages between teacher perceptions, test administration, and test outcomes in "low" stakes districts, as well as high. Data from different districts are needed in order to clarify the differential effect that various levels of "stakes" have on the course of a test. Such information may then tell us whether it really is important to know how teachers feel about standardized tests.

This study is therefore meant to provide information which, in a narrow sense, addresses the question of whether the attitudes of elementary teachers from two "low stakes" districts are a factor in their administration of mandated standardized tests in their classrooms: Is there a relationship between teachers' perceptions of a standardized test, their administration of that test, and the subsequent performance of their classes on the test? In a larger sense, however, the paper is meant to produce data which speak to the question of how teacher perceptions and actions come together in relation to a real-life administration of a standardized test in a range of school districts. As such, it may serve to enlarge our basis for answering the question of whether or not it is important to know how teachers' feel about standardized tests.

Method

The information reported in this study--on teachers' perceptions of, and preparations for, standardized tests, their descriptions of how they administered those tests, and their students' subsequent performance on those tests--was collected in the course of large-scale study of teachers' preparations for a standardized test in two "low stakes" school districts (Soltz, 1991). The term "low stakes" may be misleading, for while the two districts involved could not appropriately be termed "high stakes" in Popham's (1987) sense, this is certainly not to say that there was a lack of interest in the tests or that no pressures for performance on the tests were sensed. Indeed, virtually all of the teachers in the two districts studied expressed a number of comments about standardized tests which indicated high levels of interest, if not concern.

Prior to district-wide administration of a mandated standardized test to the third- and sixth-grade students in one suburban school district (the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, CTBS), and to the fourth graders in a second (the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, ITBS), materials designed to familiarize students with item formats and certain test-taking skills were offered to their teachers on a voluntary basis. In the case of one of the districts, virtually all of the third- and sixth-grade teachers also attended a 1.5 hour workshop providing information on the upcoming standardized test. Included were topics such as legitimate and non-legitimate ways to prepare for the test, pointers on administering the test, the meanings and interpretation of the test scores, reliability, validity, and so forth.

Shortly after administration of the tests was completed, surveys were distributed to all the teachers and students involved[1]. The teachers were surveyed to collect information on the nature and scope of their activities prior to the test and their reactions following it.

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[1]Survey forms for students focussed on their reactions to the test and their performance on it. Facsimile copies of the surveys for both students and teachers are contained in Soltz (1991).

As regards teachers' preparations for a standardized test in their classes, one of the most telling measures of the effort invested is the time they spent on test-preparation activities (Samson, 1985; Scruggs, White, & Bennion, 1986). Appropriate to this study, each teacher was asked to estimate the amount of time spent specifically preparing for the tests. In addition, five Likert-type items were included. These treated teachers' perceptions of the importance of standardized tests, the efficacy of the tests as reflections of district and personal goals, teachers' desires to learn more about the test, and their classes' "nervousness" about the test. Student performance, in the form of battery and subtest achievement test scores, were also available. Examination of the resulting data was intended to reveal any consistent patterns in the way teacher responses to the survey items were linked to test-preparation and then to test performance.

Results and Discussion

Standardized tests were administered by the elementary-level teachers serving as proctors of their classes to virtually every child at the fourth-grade level in one district (N = 1,955), and to virtually every third- and sixth-grade student in the second (N =1,734 and 1,607, respectively). All of the 231 third-, fourth-, and sixth-grade teachers who were involved in the tests subsequently received the survey form. Of that total, 178 (77%) completed and returned the survey. It is notable that most of the teachers had not only taken time to respond to the fixed-response items, but added abundant comments of their own as well.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Tests

Teacher responses to the five Likert-type items intended to tap perceptions of the standardized test they administered are summarized in tables 1 through 5. Viewed across the three grade levels involved, teachers expressed a range of responses. That is, these teachers did not react in ways that would suggest consistently negative feelings toward the test (although there was a good deal of negativity expressed). Rather, their responses

tended to spread across the range of options provided by the Likert scales. Table 1, for example, contains the results of asking teachers to indicate whether or not they perceived the test they had administered (either the CTBS or ITBS) as "important." Approximately half of the teachers from the three grades indicated that they agreed, or strongly agreed, that the test was important. No differences were found in the distributions of responses when the three grade levels were compared (χ^2 [8, $\underline{N}$ = 174] = 11.2, $\underline{p}$ > .05)

Insert Table 1 about here

Teachers tended to be more negative in their views of the standardized test as a reflection of what they were trying to teach or of their districts' goals. Even so, Table 2 indicates that while 62% of the third-, fourth-, and sixth-grade teachers sampled disagreed that the standardized tests seemed "like a fair measure" of what they tried to teach their students, 23% indicated that they did agree. The distributions of responses across the three grade levels differed, at a statistically significant level (χ^2 [8, $\underline{N}$ = 173] = 20.9, $\underline{p}$ < .01]).

Insert Table 2 about here

Similarly, data in Table 3 indicate that two-thirds of the responding teachers did not believe the CTBS/ITBS satisfactorily reflected their district's goals. But 25% of the sixth-grade teachers did agree with the statement. No statistically significant differences were noted in the distributions of responses across the three grade levels (χ^2 [8, $\underline{N}$ = 174]=11.2, $\underline{p}$ > .05).

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 provides information of a different sort. Over half of the teachers sampled indicated that they would have liked to learn more about how they could use the results of the standardized test they gave their students, a finding that suggests that the majority were not entirely closed-minded about the tests. The patterns of teacher responses were consistent across the three grade levels (χ^2 [8, N = 169] = 7.1, p > .05).

Insert Table 4 about here

A final Likert-type item (see Table 5) asked the teachers to make a judgment regarding how "nervous" their classes were about taking the test. Across the three grade levels involved, 44% of the teachers disagreed that

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Insert Table 5 about here

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their classes were "nervous" while roughly the same numbers--41%--indicated they were. Although the data suggest that a larger proportion of the teachers with younger students tended perceive them as "nervous" about the test, the trend was not statistically significant (χ^2 [8, N = 172] = 13.1, p>.05).

Preparations for Standardized Tests

Teachers were asked to estimate how much time that had specifically given to preparing their students for the standardized test (Soltz, 1991). The distributions of times reportedly spent by the third-, fourth-, and sixth-grade teachers preparing their classes for standardized testing are given in figures 1, 2, and 3.

Insert Figures 1, 2, & 3 about here

Sizable differences in the mean estimated test preparation times, as well as in the ranges of estimated times, were found to be related to the

grade levels involved. Based on their reports, the third-grade teachers spent an average of 7.9 hours (sd = 10 hours) specifically preparing for the CTBS. The fourth-grade teachers reported devoting an average of 2.2 hours (sd = 3.2 hours) specifically to preparations for Iowa. And the sixth-grade teachers gave an average of 3.4 hours (sd = 3.9 hours) to test preparations. These figures fall within the ranges reported in previous studies (cf., Samson, 1985; Scruggs, White, & Bennion, 1986), but are low relative to the times reportedly spent in the "high stakes" districts studied by Shepard and Dougherty (1991). For example, the teachers in their sample indicated they had utilized substantially more time (e.g., several weeks) during the school year for instruction in subjects such as reviewing item formats and instructing students in test-taking strategies.

Although it is tempting to do so, the differences between estimated test preparation times reported by Shepard and Dougherty (1991) and Soltz (1991) should not necessarily be ascribed to the "stakes" involved. Although different stakes were apparently operating, the questions asked in the two studies were sufficiently different to obviate direct comparisons.

The Relationship of Teacher Perceptions to Test Preparations

In order to assess the question of the relationship of teacher perceptions to test preparations, responses to the five Likert-type items were correlated with the amounts of time teachers reported spending on preparations for standardized testing[2]. Table 6 contains the results, arrayed by grade.

Insert Table 6 about here

Of the fifteen correlations run, Table 6 indicates only one consistent relationship between teachers' perceptions of the tests, as measured by the five Likert-type items, and the amounts of time which they reported devoting

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[2]To avoid potential problems associated with the non-normality of distributions of test preparation times estimated by the teachers, a transformation was applied, at each of the three grade levels, resulting in a more normalized set of scores.

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to test preparations. The one statistically significant relationship appeared at the sixth-grade. Teachers' perceptions of their classes' nervousness concerning the test and test preparation times were reliably related. The negative direction of the relationship indicates that those sixth-grade teachers who tended to agree that their classes were "nervous" about the test also tended to spend relatively more time preparing for it.

Variables Related to Test Performance

Although teachers' perceptions and the time they spent in test preparations were not consistently related, there was still the possibility of finding consistent relationships between those perceptions and student performance. This possibility was investigated by calculating correlations between teachers' perceptions of the test (again as measured by responses to the five Likert-type items) and students' performance on the CTBS or ITBS, as measured by the total mean battery score. Table 7 presents the resulting

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Insert Table 7 about here

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correlations. Note that of the fifteen coefficients generated from the data, fourteen do not reach statistical significance. The statistically significant result derived from the correlations between third-grade teachers' responses to the item dealing with the importance of standardized testing and their students' total composite score on the CTBS. Teachers who agreed, or strongly agreed, with the statement that "standardized tests like the CTBS are important" had classes that tended to achieve higher total composite scores on the CTBS than those whose teachers were uncertain about the statement, or disagreed with it.

Time Spent in Test Preparations and Test Results

The final question addressed by the data in this study is whether or not the amounts of time teachers reportedly spent in preparations for the tests were related to test outcomes, in the form of adjusted student achievement

test scores. One-way analyses of covariance were run, testing whether the covariate-adjusted summary scores in reading, mathematics, language arts, or the total battery were related to the amounts of time teachers reported spending in preparing for the test. Table 8 summarizes the results.

Insert Table 8 about here

It is notable that consistent relationships between test preparation times and test results were found only at one grade level--the sixth. No statistically significant relationships were discovered between time spent in test preparations and total battery or summary scores for grades three or four[3].

Conclusions and Implications

Based on the data collected for this study, the following points seem clear. First, teacher perceptions of standardized tests varied within grades, with both positive and negative reactions recorded on several key issues. Teachers' responses to the questions about testing were not as negative as some previous researchers had noted (cf., Yap, 1985; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991, pp. 9-10). Teachers' perceptions of standardized tests were also not consistently related to either the effort teachers put into preparing their classes for the tests or to their students' performance on them. Put otherwise, these results do not contradict the assumption that the elementary school teachers studied here administered mandated standardized tests in ways largely uninfluenced by their personal feelings--negative or positive--at least as these were reflected in the Likert items sampled in this study.

These results then provide little consistent evidence for the existence of links between teachers' perceptions, test preparation efforts, and test results. The data thus suggest that teachers' perceptions of testing are not,

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[3]However, some statistically significant relationships were noted among times allotted to test preparations and individual subtests in language and mathematics, but not reading. These are reported elsewhere (Soltz, 1991).

in themselves, reliable correlates of the levels of effort spent in preparing for a test, nor of students' subsequent performance on the test. This conclusion runs counter to the argument that perceptions and subsequent behavior are closely linked. It may be the case that the linkages some have argued between, say, "attitudes" and "practices" (cf., Monsaas & Engelhard, 1991) are not particularly consistent across different samples of teachers, perhaps affected by a number of additional factors residing within either the teachers themselves or the testing situation.

One factor that may have affected the outcomes of this study should be mentioned here. As noted previously, the teachers sampled were certainly not disinterested in helping students prepare for their tests. When offered the option of obtaining test-preparation materials for their classes, close to 80% of the third-, fourth-, and sixth-grade teachers requested the materials. Well over 70% subsequently indicated that they had utilized the materials in their classes. Moreover, virtually all of the third- and sixth-grade teachers in attended a workshop on test preparations offered by their district. The possibility should be considered that the workshop, the test-preparation materials, or both, affected teachers' responses to the items in this study, particularly those on their perceptions of the tests. Moreover, if such an impact were operating, it might be expected to appear more strongly at the third- and sixth-grade levels--teachers in the district where a workshop was also presented. Indeed, this is the case on some of the Likert-type items. Thus exposure to test-preparation materials and workshops prior to the standardized test may account for some of the variance in the teacher responses noted in this study.

To return to the question: Does it really matter what teachers think of standardized tests? Based on the data in this study, the answer is, generally, no. Within the two districts and three grade levels sampled here, teachers' perceptions of standardized tests were generally unrelated to how they went about preparing for mandated standardized tests.

In the larger sense, of course, what teachers think of a standardized test matters a great deal. For the teachers sampled in this study, however, the tests were probably not seen as critical evaluations of their classes. More likely, the tests were seen as nuisances--unwanted interruptions that were neither primary accountability measures nor threats to the teacher's integrity. Given that context, perhaps teachers felt free to be honest in their perceptions of the tests and to administer them with integrity and professionalism.

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Table 1
Teachers' Responses to: "Standardized Tests Like the CTBS/Iowa Are Important."

	Response				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Third-grade Teachers	7 (11%)	23 (37%)	18 (29%)	9 (15%)	5 (8%)
Fourth-grade Teachers	4 (6%)	18 (28%)	20 (32%)	16 (25%)	6 (9%)
Sixth-grade Teachers	6 (12%)	18 (38%)	12 (25%)	11 (23%)	1 (2%)

Note. Tabled numbers indicate the total number of teachers checking an option, under the instruction to "check the answer that best describes your thinking," and percentage of total number of actual responses.

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Table 2
Teachers' Responses to: "The CTBS/Iowa Seems Like a Fair Measure of What I Try To Teach My Students."

	Response				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Third-grade Teachers:	1 (2%)	17 (28%)	4 (7%)	30 (49%)	9 (14%)
Fourth-grade Teachers:	0 (0%)	6 (9%)	11 (17%)	28 (44%)	19 (30%)
Sixth-grade Teachers:	0 (0%)	15 (31%)	11 (23%)	15 (31%)	7 (15%)

Note. Tabled numbers indicate the total number of teachers checking an option, under the instruction to "check the answer that best describes your thinking," and percentage of total number of actual responses.

Table 3
Teachers' Responses to: "The CTBS/Iowa Satisfactorily Reflects the District's Goals."

	Response				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Third-grade Teachers:	0 (0%)	10 (16%)	14 (23%)	27 (44%)	11 (18%)
Fourth-grade Teachers:	0 (0%)	4 (6%)	13 (20%)	32 (50%)	15 (23%)
Sixth-grade Teachers:	0 (0%)	12 (25%)	14 (29%)	14 (29%)	8 (17%)

Note. Tabled numbers indicate the total number of teachers checking an option, under the instruction to "check the answer that best describes your thinking," and percentage of total number of actual responses.

Table 4
Teachers' Responses to: "I Would Like to Learn More About How I Can Use the [Test] Results."

	Response				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Third-grade Teachers:	10 (17%)	30 (50%)	9 (15%)	8 (13%)	3 (5%)
Fourth-grade Teachers:	5 (8%)	24 (38%)	17 (27%)	11 (18%)	6 (10%)
Sixth-grade Teachers:	5 (11%)	19 (41%)	13 (28%)	6 (13%)	3 (7%)

Note. Tabled numbers indicate the total number of teachers checking an option, under the instruction to "check the answer that best describes your thinking," and percentage of total number of actual responses.

Table 5
Teachers' Responses to: "My Class Was Nervous about Taking the CTBS/Iowa."

	Response				
	Agree	Strongly Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Third-grade Teachers:	5 (8%)	18 (29%)	7 (11%)	21 (34%)	11 (18%)
Fourth-grade Teachers:	8 (13%)	18 (29%)	10 (16%)	25 (40%)	2 (3%)
Sixth-grade Teachers:	3 (6%)	19 (40%)	8 (17%)	15 (32%)	2 (4%)

Note. Tabled numbers indicate the total number of teachers checking an option, under the instruction to "check the answer that best describes your thinking," and percentage of total number of actual responses.

Table 6

Relationships among Teachers' Responses to Survey Items and Time Reported Spent in Test-Preparation Activities

Survey Item	r
Standardized tests like the CTBS/ITBS are important.	
Third-grade	.07
Fourth-grade	.23
Sixth-grade	.23
The CTBS/ITBS seems like a fair measure of what I try to teach my students.	
Third-grade	.16
Fourth-grade	-.05
Sixth-grade	.07
The CTBS/ITBS . . . reflects the district's goals.	
Third-grade	.12
Fourth-grade	.05
Sixth-grade	.06
I would like to learn more . . . about the CTBS/ITBS.	
Third-grade	.17
Fourth-grade	-.06
Sixth-grade	.20
My class was nervous about taking the CTBS/ITBS.	
Third-grade	-.19
Fourth-grade	-.08
Sixth-grade	-.38**

Note. Numbers of respondents vary by grade level: Third-grade, 62 teachers; fourth grade, 64 teachers; sixth grade, 48 teachers.

**$p < .01$.

Table 7
Relationships among Teachers' Responses to Survey Items
And Their Class's Mean Total Battery Score (CTBS/ITBS)

Survey Item	r
Standardized tests like the CTBS/ITBS are important.	
Third-grade	-.35**
Fourth-grade	.06
Sixth-grade	-.16
The CTBS/ITBS seems like a fair measure of what I try to teach my students.	
Third-grade	-.21
Fourth-grade	-.08
Sixth-grade	-.02
The CTBS/ITBS . . . reflects the district's goals.	
Third-grade	.00
Fourth-grade	.01
Sixth-grade	-.02
I would like to learn more . . . about the CTBS/ITBS.	
Third-grade	.00
Fourth-grade	-.19
Sixth-grade	-.08
My class was nervous about taking the CTBS/ITBS.	
Third-grade	.14
Fourth-grade	-.01
Sixth-grade	-.27

Note. Numbers of respondents vary by grade level: Third-grade, 62 teachers; fourth grade, 64 teachers; sixth grade, 48 teachers.

**$p < .01$.

Table 8

Summary of Analyses of Covariance: The Relationships of Time Spent Preparing for Standardized Tests and Performance on that Test

Grade Level	Reading Total *F*	Math Total *F*	Language Total *F*	Battery Total *F*
Third Grade	0.71	1.40	0.53	0.25
Fourth Grade	1.94	1.50	0.50	2.76
Sixth Grade	4.11*	9.00***	7.67**	7.31**

Note. The following apply to the tabled *F* ratios: Third grade, *df* = 2,77; Fourth grade: *df* = 2,81; Sixth grade: *df* = 2,58. Also note that adjusted means are not reported in this document; see Soltz, 1991.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

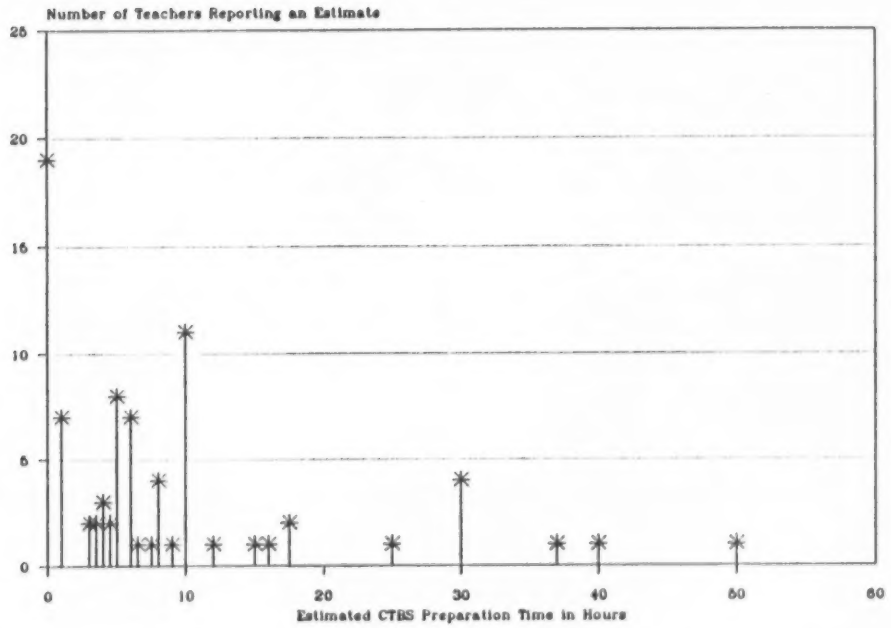

Figure 1. Times Reportedly Spent by Third-grade Teachers Preparing for the CTBS Tests.

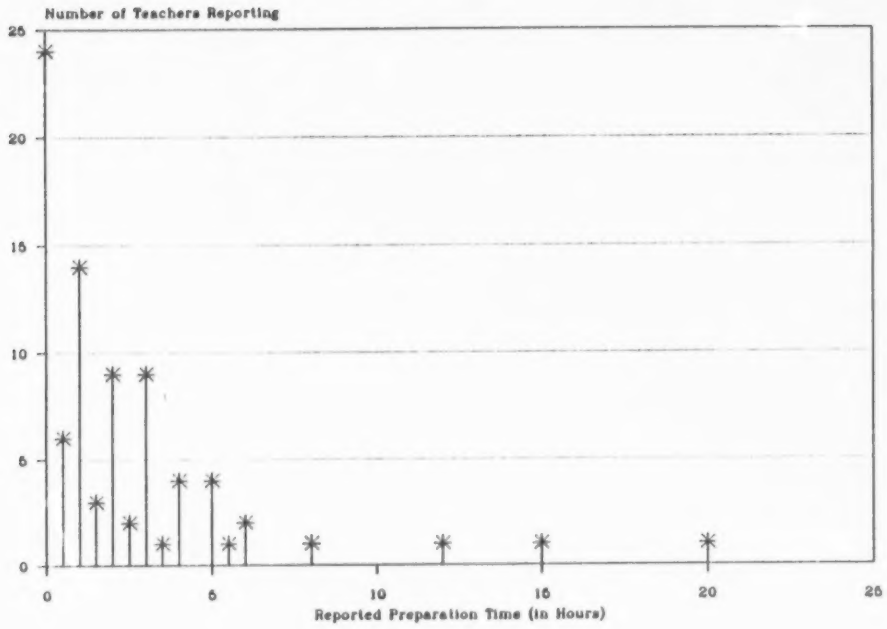

Figure 2. Times Reportedly Spent by Fourth-grade Teachers Preparing for the ITBS Tests.

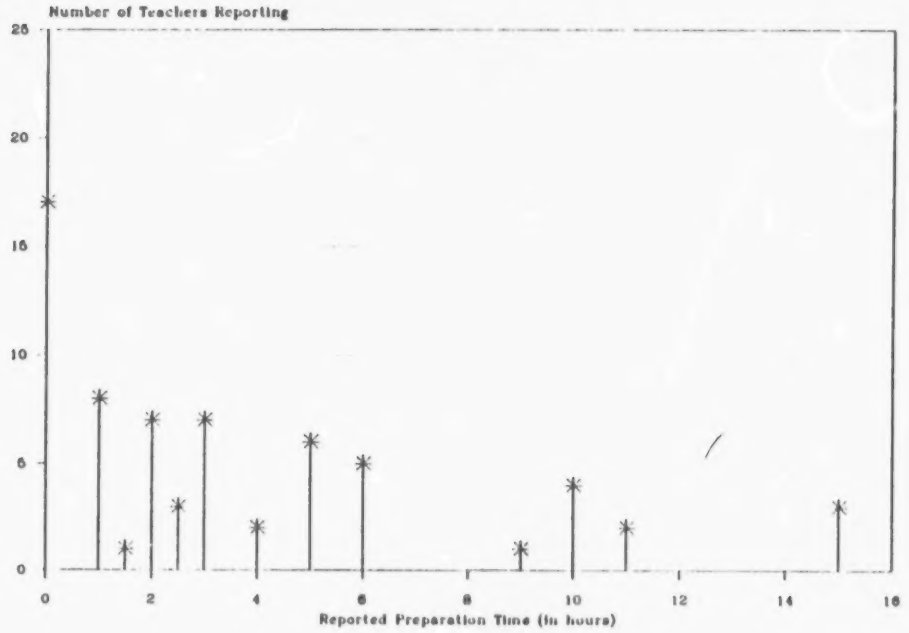

Figure 3. Times Reportedly Spent by Sixth-grade Teachers Preparing for the CTBS Tests.